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# TLS

## THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

FRIDAY • 24 OCTOBER 1980 • No 4047 • 40p



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OCTOBER 24 1980

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# The rays of the December sun

By Hugh Lloyd-Jones

PAUL R. SWEET:

Wilhelm von Humboldt

A Biography

Volume 2: 1803-1835

572pp. Columbia: Ohio State University Press. \$25.

08142 0278 0

The first volume of this admirable biography, reviewed by me in the TLS of October 20, 1978, ended at the point when his subject left Rome in October 1808, after six years as Prussian envoy to the Holy See. The second consists of four long chapters. The first covers the years between 1808 and 1810, including the period of eighteen months during which Humboldt carried out his epoch-making reform of Prussian education; the second the years between 1810 and 1815, which he spent first as Prussian Minister to Austria and then as Secretary to the Congress of Vienna; the third the final phase of his political career, including his brief spell as Prussian Minister in London and ending with his fall from power at the end of 1819; and the fourth the period between then and his death in 1835, marked by his later studies in the philosophy of history and the greater part of his vast contribution to the study of language.

Humboldt might have seemed a strange choice to head the section of the Ministry of the Interior that was responsible for education and ecclesiastical affairs. He was not known to be religious, he had never been to school, and he had only spent a brief time at a university. But nothing interested him more than education, and he had spent many years upon his own.

When he took over, elementary education in Prussia was in a poor state, especially in the country districts, where the post of school-master was often entrusted to a retired soldier, robber and thief. The Prussian Ministry of Education, which had been in charge of education since 1798, thought that the education of the lower orders should be such as to fit them for the status of life to which they had been called. Humboldt, with his eighteenth-century belief in the dignity of all beings as such, insisted that all should have the same basic primary education; he supported the introduction of Pestalozzi's methods, though he attached more importance than Pestalozzi in the study of the Bible. He established the humanistic gymnasium as the basic institution leading to the university, resisting the powerful advocates of vocational training in secondary education. Humboldt was not opposed to the idea of technical and business schools, and avoided excessive emphasis on language study; he made philosophy, mathematics and history the central subjects; but he firmly separated vocational training from that humanistic education which could promote what he called *Bildung*, self-formation. The gymnasium was often reproached with being "elitist"; but it often became so after Humboldt's time, that was not his fault, since he was a convinced believer in meritocracy, and did all he could to promote equality of opportunity.

Masov had been in favour of letting the Prussian universities disappear, preferring to encourage institutions of the type of the *École Polytechnique* which was so successful in contemporary France. Humboldt believed that the state existed for the sake of the individual, and that none of its duties was more important than that of promoting individual *Bildung*. Professors were not there to serve the students, but both were there to serve knowledge (*Wissenschaft*); and it was their duty to form a community of scholars.

He took great pains to provide the new University of Berlin with professors of the highest quality; Schleiermacher, Fichte, P. A. Wolf and the lawyer Theodor Schmalz were already in Berlin and could provide a nucleus, and several young men who had been brilliant in their careers were appointed; Savigny, aged thirty-one, and Heine, aged twenty-five, were chosen, and Hegel came later, on Humboldt's recommendation. The university was clearly linked with the Prussian Academy, which had hitherto failed to realize the hopes of its founder, Leibniz, but whose great days now began. Humboldt carefully avoided the mistake of not allowing scholars enough freedom; he knew that some people preferred to be on their own, and thought everyone should be allowed to work in his own way. He tried hard to get the king to

invest the university with a large endowment; but this was refused, for the authorities did not wish it to become too independent. In spite of this the newly founded university of once became a model for the universities of Europe, just as the university of Leiden had after its foundation two centuries before. Advocates of real learning in England, like Mark Pattison, looked to it for inspiration, just as reformers of secondary education, like Matthew Arnold, looked to the Humboldtian gymnasium.

Hardenberg's accession to power in 1810 was a misfortune for Humboldt, who throughout a long and varied relationship was to stand in Hardenberg's shadow. The Chancellor's immediate solution of the problem he presented was to send him to Vienna, a less congenial post than Rome, and one where a difficult task awaited him. At the very start, enemies circulated the rumour that he was closely linked with the activities of the Prussian Tugendbund, who were agitating for a renewed revolt against Napoleon.

Humboldt felt indeed much sympathy with Goethe and his supporters, but he was fully aware of the indivisibility of any action for the time being. The marriage of Marie Louise had given Austria a kind of special relationship with France, and until as late as August 1813 Metternich continued to be extremely cautious. It is true that Henry Kissinger in *A World Restored* has assured us that from 1811 Metternich had secretly favoured the downfall of Napoleon; here as usual Kissinger follows Wilhelm Oncken in his work of 1884-86, but Paul Sweet points out that even Strik in his admirable biography of Metternich thought that Oncken was too far in this respect. (In an interesting note on page 225, Sweet points out that though Kissinger gives the impression that the only part of Oncken's book that is valuable is the discussion of the Prussian writer, Oncken was too far from the truth.)

Soon after Metternich replaced Stadion in 1810, Humboldt saw that he was likely to retain power, and acted accordingly. He handled the complicated situation with grace, tact and flexibility, repudiating Austria's difficulties in his own government and waiting until May 1813 before

putting real pressure upon Metternich. But he was the like and soul of the movement to rise against Napoleon, and in the last stages he fought with all his strength until Austria declared war on August 11.

At this time Hardenberg was in poor health, and there seemed to be a real possibility that Humboldt might replace him; but his single-minded determination and not unconscious intellectual superiority made him enemies. When Stadion made his proposals for the re-organization of Germany, Humboldt defended the smaller German states; he felt that Germany's strength was cultural, not political, and thought they helped to preserve cultural values.

During the Congress of Châtillon and later he strongly upheld Prussian claims against Metternich. He got his way over the preliminary organization of the Congress of Vienna, but not over the eventual decisions. Tollyrand saw with great clarity that Prussia was the power most likely to be done to France in the future, and set himself to oppose her. But though Prussia failed to get the whole of Saxony she was richly compensated in Westphalia and the Rhineland, territories that were destined to turn out more valuable. Similarly at the Second Peace of Paris Humboldt failed in his struggle against Russia and England, who wished to impose moderate terms on France, but Prussia now added the Saar basin to the Ruhr, largely through his efforts.

After the successful conclusion of the war, the change of atmosphere that could be felt everywhere in Europe could be felt in Prussia too. A reactionary trend set in, and it was not favourable to Humboldt's interests. His earlier memorandum advocating the removal of all disabilities placed upon the Jews had not been fully accepted by Hardenberg in his letter of appointment of 1812, and after 1815 the law was administered in reactionary fashion. In his youth Humboldt and his wife Caroline had much frequented the company of Jews; but now his son-in-law, Count von Hatzfeldt, who had been in the German Mining Club where "no Jews, no French, and no Philistines were tolerated", Caroline said unkind

things about the Jews, though she still saw them, and Humboldt himself ceased to see them. This was a sign of the times. Reactionary counsellors like Prince von Sayn-Wittgenstein and the clergyman Anell towards absolutism was unmistakable. Humboldt had a long struggle to obtain the royal donation in which his services entitled him; the economic situation, it is true, was bad, but other less deserving people had been given more.

In 1817-18 Hardenberg got rid of him by sending him as Minister to London. Though he delighted in the Elgii Morbles and discussed the temple of Bassae with Sir Charles Cockerell, Egyptian hieroglyphics with Thomas Young and Sanskrit with Charles Wilkins, he had less time for cultural activities than might have been expected. But he got on well with the Prince Regent, who sang to him at dinner, entertained him at the Brighton Pavilion, and architecture as different as possible from that of Tegel, and later as king led him pointed by Sir Thomas Lawrence; he gratified the interests of his brother-in-law the Duke of Cumberland, the wickedest of all Queen Victoria's wicked uncles; and, most important of all, he negotiated a loan to the Prussian Government by the London Rothschilds, thus making friends, in his own later advantage, with the powerful financial Christian von Rotter.

But when after his return to Berlin in 1818, Hardenberg offered him a chance between four posts, he turned them all down, wishing only to be a member of the Staatsrat, where he would certainly have been a nuisance to the government; his friendship with Stein can have done nothing to lighten Hardenberg's suspicions. Pressed to accept ministerial office in February 1819, he took up his duties only in June, because of diplomatic duties at the Frankfurt negotiations of the Bunsen. Soon afterwards he was put out by the arrest of certain liberals, including his friend, the eminent Greek scholar F. G. Welcker, and also by the government's shelving of the question of a new constitution; the passing of the reactionary Karlsbad Decrees in late September made his position virtually intolerable. That issue, together with its

strangely ill-fated of Hardenberg's

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But Humboldt's work on the philology of history was far the most important than his contribution to linguistics. He learnt an immense variety of languages, and did valuable work on Ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and Sanskrit. In the last, he was assisted, in studying the Vedas, by the Brahmin, Gita, and particularly by his message that the motive must be in the deed and not in the event; in a review of his edition of the Vedas, he declined to share Humboldt's high estimate of its value. He did valuable work on Amerindian languages, and Sweet has interesting information about the contacts with the American linguists John Pickering and Peter Barrow, which he owed to George Bancroft. In 1826 he was increasingly occupied with the languages of South-East Asia, Indonesia and Polynesia, and between 1830 and 1835 appeared his monumental study of Kawi, the hieratic and poetic language of Java, with its long and beautiful Sanskrit title, *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren*

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which Yovel considers as the most important of his youth. Convinced of the absolute goodness of man and of the externality of evil (in the same

provisional, inadequate nature of earthly moral powers, is one of the novel's most effective subjects. Certainly *Earthly Powers* doesn't end

been puzzled for years about how a bird *whets* its wings.

When Alan brings Karin back to

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# The naming of urban parts

By Julian Symons

**J. K. SISSMAN:**  
In the Darkness  
The Collected Poems  
94pp. Secker and Warburg. £7.95.  
1 436 4 6220 1

The life of L. E. Sissman can be briefly told. He was born in 1928, went to Harvard in 1944 as an over-achiever (six foot-four and over fourteen stone) and precocious student, was rusticated two years later, readmitted, elected Class Poet, graduated cum laude, married in 1951, and went into advertising, where in this occupation he had a successful career as "creative director" in 1957, then as "art director" in 1958. In 1960, he moved to New York, where he lived for the next 15 years, until his death in 1975 by a heart attack. His first collection of poems, *In the Darkness*, appeared in 1968. The two-volume *Collected Poems* is a title based on the discovery of a box of his poems, which he had hidden away in a closet, after his death. The poems are a collection of his life, from his early days in New York, to his last days in New York, and his last days in New York.

The early work that earned him the label of "Class Poet" at Harvard was a collection of poems, which he had hidden away in a closet, after his death. The poems are a collection of his life, from his early days in New York, to his last days in New York, and his last days in New York.

It was not merely the confessional nature of his poetry, but also the general American tendency towards a "confessional" poetry of the 1960s. The poems are a collection of his life, from his early days in New York, to his last days in New York, and his last days in New York.

But what we have in American Sissman, and what was that? The prevailing note is conversational, rather Browningesque in its energy and chatty enthusiasm, the external subjects are everything that comes under an observant man's eye in Boston (where much of the poet's life was spent) and New York. The first lines of the first poem, which is called "Going Home, 1945", but was obviously written much later, catch the tone:

his return. "Your grandmother will just be sick. She got it from Dundee." "Ship it." "It's glass, I can't." "Here comes the train..." If there are times when one thinks that this visit home might be more effectively put down as a short story, isn't there also a feeling that Browning's verse novels would do better as prose?

The poem is characteristic in its accomplishment and its assurance; which is far from saying that it is all Sissman has to offer. He is splendid at rendering the outside of things, as in "A Day in the City (Boston-New York)", which gives us "America's Queens" (Whore corners of Carey Bussan, From Flushing to this carnival, to the fifty-story-high air of the Ammir Tower, "core/As the rich breath of conchaint unions" on to East Forty-Second Street, "Such a place that goes on in the titles—Gore Hall, Adams House, Charles Street, Innan Square, State Street, Central Park, South, Luchow's, Korvette's in the multiplied many times in the poems themselves, which might be called a byword for the American urban scene. There are times when this poem has an air of desperation, as though Sissman felt a need for reassurance about the stability, and even the existence, of the world in which he lived. Certainly no other recent poet has done so so fully or so overtly.

**On the subject of lechery**  
By Alistair Elliot

**DEREK PARKER (Editor):**  
An Anthology of Erotic Verse  
353pp. Constable. £8.50.  
0 09 463500 5

In the second circle of Hell, where Dante imagined the lustful, buffeted through the air by an onrush of flames, Francesco da Rimini tells how he was first killed by his wife's lover, and then by his brother-in-law. They had been reading. The book was about Gallois, the medieval punster who had guided Lancelot and Guinevere through the universal obstacles of embarrasment and obligation. In fact, the book was itself a Gallois, a Proust, and when they read about the loquacious, they were overcome: "that day we read no further in it"—on which Dante (V) faints dead away with sympathy. Meanwhile, however, Dante, the writer of the poem is silently taking the loftier and more comprehensive view that a casual sinner knows what he/she is doing and does not care to offend the price. These poems are made simply by having Francesca use the conventional language of thirteenth-century love poetry. Her weak phrases—"this one, who never shall be parted from me", "I love, that takes me a hurrible from loving"—taken on a hurrible from loving from their context: "Hail is precisely the place from which 'the Love that moves the sun and the other stars' is always absent: She was loved though she was loving, and wanted it to last for ever; she got what she asked for, as it turns out to be everlasting misery."

We have much coarser stimulants available today that were provided by that poor medieval romancer, and disapproval of them is now expressed less magisterially; but the recognition of the themes: erotica are corrupting. Both of these charges mean something to us—we are touched by evocations of desire, and we recognize that the ecstasy is a step out of or escape from the chronically unpleasant, but very interesting, real world. But although literature has to be "about" something, it is more barbaric to think that the "subject" is more than an ingredient in the pleasure to be had from literature. It is something more like the pleasure of reading, or the cook from the dish, as it were the

personal past, in particular youth at Harvard, or as in the ambitious "A War Requiem" try to give us a view of history. This piece, the longest in the book, is a series of sharp epigrammatic poems that begin with the theme of the present, touch in a Spanish Civil War scene shown in reactions at home to the death of a member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and continue through poems running thirty years on from 1939 to show what people became and what living is like. The poem is also in part autobiographical, dealing with incidents in Sissman's life as a vacuum-cleaner salesman and copy editor in a publishing firm, before he landed in advertising. Here is the beginning of a salesman's day, labelled "East Cambridge 1949": Behind the stacked extent of There is a little slum; I'll take you there. Laiden with my black high-filled salesman's case, Perhaps a map or two, and on my face, The first sweat of the day. This is We start: a hot tan to my gingerbread Proud of its peaky cap. This lady's in. She's German, tiny, old, respectable, Not buying anything. Next door, a tall Blue tenement hangs open. In its The fumes of urine and the Don't anger well for brushed men.

The poems examine this and other kinds of life in detail. Sissman did not write much about his advertising experience or about his illness, but what is put down convincingly. The last poems in the book, particularly "Homage to Chloë" (a "homage" to a friend), are moving because they apply the first experience of Sissman's usual style to the miseries of hospital life:

If Hell hides on earth this must be it: This tun-bright-lit-at-all-hours-of-the-day And-night recovery room, where nurses fill In scrabulous steps between All cheek by jowl that hold Suspended in the grog of half-recovered limbs and light-blue light. And imbalances of light-blue light.

Sissman was evidently a courageous man, and we must discover a better press than he got during his lifetime. (In this country he remains very little known, something which this book may help to change.) Yet his work has limitations which prevent agreement with those who would put him in the first rank of modern American poets, with Lowell and Berryman. He used the jocular punster he favoured forcefully and well, yet the result does cause some monotony. In many places it would be possible to shift whole sections of one poem into another without the result being apparent. The measure lends also to impose its own restriction on the poet.

It is, in fact, rather hard to decide, sometimes, whether words are intended to mislead the reader or not. The following is from an instructive poem for undergraduates, *The Economy of Love*, from the second edition, (1945): Forthwith discover to her dazzled sight The stately Novelty, and to her Usher the new Acquaintance. She Aversa will coldly chide, and half Blushing, half pleas'd, the tumult With Neck rortored and oblique Regard; Nor quita her curious Eye Refraining quite.

John Armstrong was a newly graduated Edinburgh physician when this first appeared, anonymously, and though Armstrong later became a friend of Wilkes I believe the poem is as satirical as it is general. Certainly, Erasmus was more successful in his imitations of French poets here, as Toulou, Eluard, Apollinaire and Baudelaire. And did the Russians and Scandinavians (not to mention the Asians and Africans) write no erotic verse? At that rate, Germans and Czechs can be congratulated for getting it at all (one poem each, by Gertrude and Bartok).

Then, once you start getting worried about misprints (in poems by Rochester, Swift, Tom Marry, Ruckins, Yeats, MacDiarmid, R. Campbell, Merula, Bertelmann and Bartok—most of them conspicuous because they make the text unrecognizable, you find yourself wondering if the editor picked those misprints up from other anthologies. Some (like the one in Tom Moore's delightful "Did Not") come from which must have saved Parker a lot of work. In the last poem, from Cole in a row, there is a misprint, and there are many others that do not

happen to fall together. Of course, the book is a collection of poems, and the editor has to choose what to include. The book is a collection of poems, and the editor has to choose what to include.

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# Regenerating Lamarck

By John Maynard Smith

**E. J. STEELE:**  
Somatotype Selection and Adaptive Evolution  
On the Inheritance of Acquired Characters  
90pp. Croom Helm. £8.95.  
0 7099 2309 0

In essence, only two scientific theories have ever been suggested to account for organic evolution. The first, that of Lamarck, is loosely referred to as "the inheritance of acquired characteristics". Individuals do, during their lifetimes, adapt to their environments, for example, by developing particular muscles, learning skills, adapting to high altitudes and acquiring immunity to diseases. It was Lamarck's proposal that progressive improvements occur in evolution because such adaptations occur in the parents and are passed on to their children. The second theory, Darwin's, explains progressive evolution by arguing that those individuals which happen, perhaps by chance, to have heritable characteristics which favour survival and reproduction will pass those characteristics to their children.

Darwin himself was only a half-hearted Darwinist. He accepted Lamarck's idea also, and even invented a process, pangenesis, which could account for it; he supposed that particles, or pangenes, passed from all parts of the body to the germ cells to convey information about acquired adaptations. Most biologists today accept Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, but reject his, and Lamarck's theory of inheritance; in this they follow the lead first clearly given by Weismann, who (with some exceptions) I believe has in a moment denied the possibility that changes, good or ill, occurring in the body, or "soma",

could cause corresponding changes in the germ cells.

What E. J. Steele has attempted in his book is to suggest a mechanism, consistent with modern molecular biology, which could underlie Lamarckian types of inheritance. His idea is this. The body is made of cells, all of which initially contain genetic material identical to that in the germ cells. Suppose, however, random genetic differences, "somatic mutations", arise between the body cells. Some changes will enable a cell to multiply more rapidly, so that many cells will carry the newly arisen mutation. Suppose now that there is some process, comparable with Darwin's pangenesis, whereby genes can be carried from body cells to germ cells, and there be incorporated into the chromosomes. The result would be that changes arising in body cells could be transmitted to the next generation.

Why should Steele imagine that such a process occurs? He argues mainly from the facts of immunology. Here, the central observation is that an individual rabbit (or mouse, or man) can produce "antibodies" (which are protein molecules) capable of binding to a very large variety of "antigens" (which, crudely, are substances the body is not used to). The capacity to produce antibodies is inherited, but the number of different kinds of antibodies an individual can produce is probably many millions, and so it is unlikely (but not impossible) that genes specifying all possible antibodies exist in the germ line.

The common opinion is that variability is generated during development, perhaps by mutation, and that those cells which, by mutation, acquire the ability to make the needed antibody then multiply. If so, Steele has the first part of his mechanism—an adaptation brought about by mutation and selection between cells. There is much less reason to suppose that genes are carried from somatic cells and incorporated into germ cells, but Steele has reasons to think that, if it happens at all, it must be a rare event, but molecular processes have written substantial sections of the book, and British Petroleum, whose activities are enlarging the area but who give a grant towards the book's production, have made a powerful reason to think that, if it happens at all, it must be a rare event, but molecular processes have written substantial sections of the book, and British Petroleum, whose activities are enlarging the area but who give a grant towards the book's production, have made a powerful reason to think that, if it happens at all, it must be a rare event, but molecular processes have written substantial sections of the book, and British Petroleum, whose activities are enlarging the area but who give a grant towards the book's production, have made a powerful reason to think that, if it happens at all, 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